



by Jia Wu and Howard Zhou

[General McConville's](#) "People First" prerogative states, "Now with people as the Army's top priority...the Army will deliver on our readiness and modernization priorities. When we care about people, we get them in the right jobs at the right time, [and] that is how we win." This new approach to the old Army motto, "Mission First, People Always" made strides in cultural reforms within the Army over the last few years. It is clear leaders are more focused now on addressing Soldier issues that affect both physical and mental well-being. These positive reforms require not only amendments to unit programs, but also increased self-awareness at the leader-level and deeper understanding of the resources available to Soldiers.

Whether we realize it or not, one commonality every leader shares is ingrained [cognitive](#)

[biases](#). These biases impact decision-making and affect how individuals perceive the world. Over time, our brains develop pre-conceived tendencies as a mechanism for processing information more quickly. Biases are crucial for survival in flight or fight responses, yet can also become the leading cause of an individual's inaccurate assessment of others and situations. Leaders must consider their past experiences before immediately reacting to subordinates. Exercising brief pauses to digest information helps produce a calmer, more calculated response.

Consider knee-jerk reactions - some leaders react quickly and often poorly to bad news attached to short suspenses. Continued experiences like this will develop into a bias, ultimately causing trends in poor judgment of similar situations.

Self-awareness is the foundation for strong leadership and starts at the lowest level. So how do we develop self-awareness in our leaders? We can begin incorporating basic psychology lessons into professional development courses for both officers and noncommissioned officers. Exploring traits through free online resources such as [16 Personalities Test](#) will help leaders understand their Soldiers' traits. Even listening to podcasts or [Ted Talks](#) can be built into Leaders Time Training (LTT) to open up the conversation on self-awareness and reflection.

Many leaders addressing Soldier discipline issues tend to fall victim to confirmation bias and the [Dunning-Kruger Effect](#). They may find out about a certain "problem Soldier" and are now sensitized to every bit of negative feedback they hear regarding that Soldier (confirmation bias). They may also immediately blame the Soldier for their actions without knowing the full extent to their story, such as familial struggles or attempting to diffuse a situation where they eventually appear guilty by association (Dunning-Kruger Effect). A stellar Soldier can even be perceived as a poor performer because he or she is in charge of a squad that consistently has discipline and performance issues that are completely outside his or her control (halo effect). [Employees should be treated based on unique facts; don't](#)

[assume everyone's situation is identical](#). Self-awareness training can even be done at the team-level with personal discussions and vignettes of leaders falling prey to their own cognitive biases and how they navigated the situation. Self-reflection is the first step in developing a positive-growth mindset and overall positive behavioral and mental health.

In addition to developing more self-aware leaders, consideration of “People First” also requires a deliberate balance of Army requirements and soldiers’ mental fitness. When leaders focus on Soldiers and their mission, their own mental health oftentimes slips from their priority list. What this does is unintentionally impact the leaders’ direct environment - [neglecting yourself puts you at risk for burnout, compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress](#). Consequently, neglecting self-care may manifest itself into poor decision-making or attitudes that directly impact Soldiers’ lives or careers.

Management of expectations also extends to deliberate-planning to afford soldiers the opportunity for self-care and recreation. This requires leaders to allocate time for training or redeployment recovery, and advocate the seeking of Behavioral Health resources to help navigate stressful times. The consideration of the whole-person concept when addressing personnel management is crucial in creating a balanced work environment.

“People First” is considerate of both married and single soldiers’ needs and the programs available to both demographics. Single soldiers’ work-life balance often becomes neglected by both parties - by the bachelor Soldier who invests their life purpose into their job, and by the leader who may naturally sympathize with familial circumstances because they have a family of their own. [Single enlisted soldiers reported being called back for extra details considerably more often than their married peers](#). Balancing mission requirements with availability of soldiers will always be difficult. Recognition of these issues - i.e. single with dependents, single without dependents, married without dependents, married with dependents, widowed, divorced, etc. - and personally addressing task requirements directly with the impacted Soldier provides a level of transparency necessary to encourage shared

understanding. There is a natural bias towards familial concerns innate to human nature that leaders must understand and be ready to address, especially for single soldiers who may not have the familial support system necessary to recover from major life events. A way-forward may be to add emphasis on informal counselings, team-building events, and resourcing help necessary to encourage healthy personal lives for Soldiers.

Leaders need to be informed on the various programs and resources available to assist Soldiers with their needs beyond the more commonly known ones such as [Army Emergency Relief Fund](#) and [Army Community Service](#). For example, non-medical attendants or the Special Compensation for Assistance with Activities of Daily Living ([SCAADL](#)) programs are eligible to single soldiers requiring complex long-term medical care. The [Army Recovery Care Program](#) (ARCP) or Army Medicine advocates are additional resources available to leaders to request for single Soldiers who are seriously ill, wounded, or require additional assistance such as transportation to appointments and grocery shopping. None of these programs are a substitute for engaged and caring leadership, however, they are certainly effective means to supplement what unit leaders can or cannot offer organically.

Outsourcing annual training requirements through resources available on most Installations will also help familiarize junior leaders and Soldiers with opportunities that are generally free-of-charge and much more engaging than standard PowerPoint briefings. [Family Advocacy Program](#) (FAP) and [Military Family Life Counselors](#) (MFLC) have multiple programs that support both married and single Soldiers with stress management, newborn assistance, marriage counselings, and even have links to social workers or abortion clinics. The newly developed Commander's Risk Reduction Toolkit ([CRRT](#)) has programs that conduct Alcohol and Substance Abuse training through "beer goggle dodgeball" events and also offers conflict management for leaders. There are endless resources available to company level commanders that are under-utilized due to lack of knowledge and experience that needs to be part of the "People First" reform.

Ultimately, enacting the "People First" initiative requires leaders to expand their knowledge

base both inwards and outwards. It is not a one-or-the-other approach but rather a holistic mindset. Promoting outreach to garrison programs and initiatives is important in helping Soldiers (and self) navigate opportunities and services available. Leaders must also exercise flexibility and adaptive leadership to build an inclusive culture. This is often easier said than done, but is absolutely crucial if we wish to pay more than lip service to “People First.”

Essentially, putting “People First” requires leaders to increase their own emotional intelligence and use it as a base for becoming the best advocates for their Soldiers possible while still accomplishing the mission.

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